

IN MEMORIAM: REX MORTIMER (1926-1979)

J. D. Legge

The death of Rex Mortimer on December 31, 1979 leaves the international circle of Indonesianists much poorer. His *Indonesian Communist Party and Land Reform, 1959-1965* (Clayton, 1972), his essays in *Showcase State: The Illusion of Indonesia's 'Accelerated Modernization'* (Sydney, 1973) and his *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno* (Ithaca, 1974) were important works. They were very different in character from each other and the differences revealed the diversity of his capacities. *The Indonesian Communist Party and Land Reform* was a stimulating, thoroughly researched essay. *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno* was a mature work of traditional scholarship. *Showcase State* showed him pioneering, in polemical vein, the application of dependency theory to Indonesia. If these writings were all that he had given us they would represent a significant contribution. In fact, they are far from all. Of greater importance to those who knew him were his flexibility of mind, the passion of his intellectual commitment and the persistence and engagement with which he conducted his enquiry. He did not, like so many of us, tackle separate problems in a patchy way. There was a wholeness and coherence and long-term sense of direction about all that he did. His academic life was a continuously evolving progress as his study of Indonesian communism broadened, in due course, to a general concern with the problems of Third World countries and as he moved from there to a more precise focus on theories of peasant society. He was one of the few Indonesianists who consistently saw his particular study against the broader background of world politics and world economy and who could write easily on Third World problems in general. On these, and related matters, he maintained a vigorous dialogue with colleagues by correspondence, in seminars, and through his rough working papers of which "Asian Marxism and the Dis-Europeanisation of the World" and his survey of Underdevelopment/Dependency Theory, prepared for a Monash seminar, are recent examples.

It is remarkable that Rex's international standing was established in such a short period of time--in fact, in the last fifteen years of his life. He was a man of two careers, changing direction sharply in 1965. In Australia Rex Mortimer was known to a wide public as a long-time Communist leader and a salaried official of the Communist Party of Australia. He entered the University of Melbourne in 1943 and, attracted by the comprehensiveness and coherence of Marxist theory, he became, towards the end of his first year, an active member of the university branch of the party. After graduating in Law, he worked as an official of the party, full-time, then part-time, and then full-time again. He remained faithful to it through the fifties and he did not, as many of his disillusioned colleagues did, use the excuse of Hungary to cut ties that had become irksome by the 20th Congress, if not before. In the early sixties he became editor of *The Guardian*, the official organ of the party in Victoria. By the mid-sixties, however, he had become dissatisfied with the party's political momentum and indeed with its purposes within Australian society. Communist theory seemed no longer helpful in the understanding of questions of social change in advanced societies, and he came to find it unhelpful also in his study of the questions which increasingly demanded his attention--questions

relating to change and development in nonindustrial societies. He spent six weeks in Indonesia in 1964 and this experience triggered a desire to go more deeply into the problems it posed for him. A year later he decided to give up his editorship of *The Guardian* and return to university study. It was to be another four years before he finally resigned from the party, and it is worth emphasizing that his departure from it was made without bitterness. Unlike many ex-Communists, he did not swing violently and reactively in the opposite direction or reject former beliefs and values. With the passage of time his outlook became increasingly removed from that of his past, but his memories of his party career nevertheless remained warm, affectionate, and proud.

After a preliminary year at Monash in 1966 he secured a scholarship which enabled him to pursue doctoral studies between 1967 and 1969. In the preliminary year he faced the difficult task of adjusting once more to disciplined study. In the following years he carried out his study of the PKI from 1959 to 1965 and read widely in related fields. From his well-established base in Marxist social theory, he savored other forms of theorizing and he reveled in the intellectual excitement it gave him. The completion of his Ph.D. was followed by appointment to a lectureship in Government in the University of Sydney in 1970, to the chair of Political Studies in the University of Papua and New Guinea between 1974 and 1976 (on secondment from Sydney), and by a year of travel in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the United States in 1978, before his return to an associate professorship in Sydney. His Papua New Guinea appointment was well timed, for it fitted neatly with his expanding interest in problems of politics, development, and class formation in the Third World. His experience there found expression in his most recently published work, his contributions to A. Amarshi, K. Good and R. Mortimer, *Development and Dependency: The Political Economy of Papua New Guinea* (K.L., 1979).

These were fruitful years, reflected not merely in his published books and articles but in his teaching and in his informal dialogue with students and colleagues. Some Australian observers might see his political career as the most important and most colorful part of his life but, to me, his second career, in which he established a firm international scholarly reputation, seems the period of his greatest influence. His research contribution stands for all to see. He also had the gifts of the superb teacher. He was a clear expositor, combining a calmness and maturity of judgment with elegance of written style and directness and earthiness of spoken style. He believed passionately in the importance of the intellectual enterprise and was contemptuous of those who sold it short. He was reflective and open minded in discussion. In spite of the dogmatism of his political background, he was the least doctrinaire of men. (He remembered in later years that, even when a member of the Communist Party, his liberalism sometimes earned him the criticism of other party officials.) And running through it all was his dry and ready wit.

Rex Mortimer was cut down in full flight. He learned that he had lung cancer shortly after a seminar at Monash in August, 1979 at which he presented a paper, though obviously in considerable pain. He later fulfilled another speaking commitment to a Canberra seminar in November. He died at the end of December. Given his intellectual commitment and the sense of purpose and direction that had marked his study over the past fifteen years, one must wonder where his thoughts would have taken him had he lived. His immediate task was to be a study of the group to which he had once belonged--the Melbourne University Communists of the late forties. His combination of sympathy and detachment fitted him, perhaps uniquely, to explore the motives, character, and experience of those who had made a commitment to the party at that time, and this study, too, would have been part of his overall striving towards an understanding of the nature of theory and its bearing

on the complexities of social reality and human action. He would have continued, no doubt, to concern himself with problems of social change in peasant societies. But one cannot ignore the apocalyptic vein that sometimes appeared in his work. Never, even when at work at a rarified theoretical level, did he forget that he was dealing with individual human beings as well as with the collective human agony. It is worth quoting one of his last papers, a discussion of the contribution of Wallerstein to dependency theory, as an example of his capacity for the prophetic utterance. Impressed with the power of Wallerstein's vision, he was nonetheless critical of aspects of it. "There is no room in Wallerstein's schema," he complained, "for the vitalising force of human cultures and ideologies--the alternative human projects embodied in revolutionary movements. . . . There is no sense of that overshadowing crisis represented by the ecological time bomb--that which lends to all utopianism an increasing air of transcendental realism. . . . Class analysis, in short, must aspire to capture the agony and ecstasy of the age if it is to be more than a static portrayal of stratification."

It doesn't really matter what answers he might ultimately have found. For us the loss is not the answers but the way in which the search would have been conducted.

